

**Opening Statement  
Ranking Member Connie Mack  
Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere  
Committee on Foreign Affairs  
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**Guns, Drugs and Violence:  
The Merida Initiative and the Challenge in Mexico**

Thank you Mr. Chairman. Thank you for your strong leadership in this subcommittee and for holding this important hearing today.

I also want to thank our witnesses for coming and for sharing their insight and knowledge and thoughts on our relationship with Mexico.

The panels today will be discussing key issues relating to the escalating violence related to growing drug trafficking and the cartels in Mexico and how the Merida Initiative will help bolster not just our security but the security of the entire hemisphere.

There are several areas I would particularly like to focus on with our witnesses today. But before I do, I think it is important to highlight the hard work of President Felipe Calderon. This is a president who has taken the drug cartels head on and has not flinched in his fight to rid Mexico of these cowards. This fight will not be an easy one, and I think that it is admirable that the Mexican government has undertaken a fight that many have shied away from.

As to our panel, I am curious to hear your thoughts on current funding for the Merida Initiative and where and how should the money be used? The Merida Initiative is an essential tool in the fight against drugs and crime.

While I have been and remain a strong supporter of Plan Colombia, I recognize that many members of Congress are divided over this. But no one can deny that drug trafficking in Colombia has been greatly reduced and the violence in Colombia caused by the cartels and narcoterrorists such as the FARC has been overwhelmingly reduced.

As everyone is aware, in 2008, nearly 6000 people were killed in Mexico due to drug trafficking violence. This year alone there have been more than 1000 deaths. These numbers and the growing strength and audacity of the cartels means that now, more than ever, Congress and the Obama Administration must stand with our allies in Mexico and support full funding for the Merida Initiative.

This is not only a problem for Mexicans. This is a problem for Americans. You see, there is an interesting link between drugs and the instability of governments.

Consider Venezuela. Venezuela is a country that is a major trafficking route for drugs coming out of South America. Hugo Chavez has allowed narco-traffickers, such as the FARC and others, to operate freely. And just this week El Salvador elected a candidate whose party was closely affiliated with the FARC.

As the fight against drug cartels continues in Mexico, and men like Hugo Chavez roam around Latin America manipulating democracies, let us not let those cowardly thugs fill the void. Instead, let us stand tall with our friends and help them in their need.

Mr. Chairman, another tool that is indispensable in fighting drugs and crime are strong commercial ties. My judgment is that the free flow of trade between two countries is the basic weapon one can use in fighting poverty, crime, and drugs. In my opinion, a continued and strong bond between our peoples can only lead to increased prosperity in both nations. We in Congress must have an honest conversation when it comes to this issue. If we have concerns that deal with safety; then we must address these safety concerns and ensure that the free flow of goods is re-established. If we have other concerns, we must work together with our Mexican partners to fully address, and more importantly, resolve these issues.

Lastly, I wanted to touch on a critical concern that will surely come up today: guns. Many have used the violence in Mexico to push their gun control agenda. My constituents know that I am an ardent supporter of the Bill of Rights and in particular the Second Amendment.

While we all know that the escalating violence in Mexico is a tremendous problem and must be decreased, we cannot allow people in this country to use this situation in order to advance their gun ban agenda here in the United States.

Instead of creating new laws and bans in this country, we should start by enforcing the existing laws that are on our books. As an example Mr. Chairman, it is already against the law to smuggle guns across the border. It is already against the law to use a straw man to purchase a gun in this country. But now is not the time to punish law-abiding Americans and abrogate our Second Amendment rights.

Mr. Chairman, all of us on this committee share the same objective: we want to see illegal drug trafficking eliminated. As I hear our witnesses today, I will be paying close attention to their remarks on some of the issues I touched on and I look forward to their testimony and answers to our questions.

Thank you Mr. Chairman.